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Co-creating an artistic-educational space among South African children and artist-educators from Cape Town and Copenhagen

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Published in:
International Journal of Critical Pedagogy

Publication date:
2019

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Document license:
[Unspecified](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Svendler Nielsen, C., & Samuel, G. M. (2019). Intercultural teaching and learning in dance and visual arts: Co-creating an artistic-educational space among South African children and artist-educators from Cape Town and Copenhagen. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 10(1), 98-117.
<http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/view/1557>

INTERCULTURAL TEACHING AND LEARNING IN DANCE AND VISUAL ARTS:

CO-CREATING AN ARTISTIC-EDUCATIONAL
SPACE AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDREN AND
ARTIST-EDUCATORS FROM CAPE TOWN AND
COPENHAGEN

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Abstract

This paper explores a one week dance/visual arts project with 9-10 year old children from that took place at the Peter Clarke Art Centre (PCAC) in Cape Town, South Africa in February 2017. The project is run by an intercultural group of artist-educators and researchers residing in Denmark and South Africa. In the project the children explore ideas of the climate, seasons and elements of nature and see how they both make and receive imprints as human beings in the world. It thereby casts light on what children can learn through artistic-educational collaborations about their environment and life in general. The paper illuminates what expressions and experiences become possible in the co-created and 'lived space' (van Manen, 1990) of this place through observations and dialogues that include arts-based methods (Jones & Leavy, 2014) in both a critical (Apple, 2013) and embodied learning perspective (Danuser & Sabetti, 2001; Wright, 2010). A hermeneutic-phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990) is used as a starting point for collecting 'lived experiences' of all the

participants from the project week. Narratives contribute to exploring what is specific about the space being created, what its purpose is for the different participants, what possibilities this specific place gives for the artistic teaching and learning processes, and what all this leads to from the perspectives of the children. The overarching question guiding both the teaching and the research methodology being: how are children given a voice in all aspects of the project?

Keywords: intercultural, arts education, co-creation, phenomenology

A group of 9-10 year old girls and boys from a primary school in Cape Town are experiencing the last day of a dance and visual arts project. They are going to show an audience of parents, siblings and some teachers what they have been engaged in during a week with artist-educators from Denmark and South Africa. The children have been co-creating the site-specific tour that we are about to embark on. But before the audience arrives we have to move around the different sites and recall what we will be doing. When we get to the final spot and the rehearsal is over, one girl asks if they can also do their own dance. This is a dance (and song!) they have been practicing in their school for another occasion. We ask them to show us the dance and while they dance and sing with excitement to find out what we think about it, suddenly one of the adults in the room grabs a box lying on the floor and starts drumming a rhythm in tune with the children's song, then another adult grasps two paper rolls and starts clapping them in the same rhythm. Little by little all the adults are joining in with different improvised instruments to accompany the rhythm and moving closer to form a circle around the children who are still dancing and singing, now with shining eyes. This is like a big hug that embraces all the relationships and processes that have been building over the week. We are ready to go downstairs to greet the audience which has arrived...

(Charlotte Svendler Nielsen)

This article explores the experiences and politics of space and place, and what shifts may occur in an artistic and educational setting earmarked for children when multiple approaches in a pedagogy of the sciences is disrupted by the arts. We explore children's and artist-educators' experiences of co-creating a specific space for learning about climate changes, seasons and the elements of nature (water, air, earth and fire) in and through dance and visual arts by asking which experiences became possible in the space, which was created in this place. But before getting into the more theoretical considerations, let us first share the felt sense of the place in which we were going to co-create a new artistic-educational space.

Entering the large garden at the foot of its multi-level path, I took in the imposing old manor house in Newlands, Cape Town and the place known as the Peter Clarke Art Centre. An enormous tree still in full flower of cream gardenias the size of footballs anchored the space. The sand was dry. A sweet, lemony scent hung in the warm air. How appropriate that an integrated arts educational project for and with children from a local school was going to be undertaken at this site in South Africa in early 2017 by a diverse team of 'artist-educators'. (Gerard M. Samuel)

In this article we make a distinction of the notions of place and space as places being 'physical spaces' (that can be measured) and 'lived spaces' (that can be felt) (van Manen, 1990), hence we look upon the artistic-educational space as simultaneously lived and contextual and thus giving certain opportunities for ways of relating, communicating and as a consequence also for the learning, which becomes possible. Space is an existential theme that refers to places where people move in their lives and can help to better understand their life-worlds. Dutch educator Max Van Manen (1990) underlines that the space in which we are, influences how we feel. He illustrates this with the notion of home as a space that often gives us a special feeling, a feeling of 'being home'/'being ourselves'. But in the context of the Cape Flats this is not the case for all the children as what happens in the space in which they live does not necessarily make their 'home' a safe place.

The context of arts education in schools in South Africa when seen from a broad frame could be described as under threat, as many schools do not have the resources neither human nor infrastructural to engage with this specific learning area. The merger of separate Departments of Education that were allocated for each race group (White, Black, Colored and Indian), and a redistribution and re-prioritization of limited resources, are some of the factors that have contributed to this demise. This complex issue extends not only to a lack of suitably qualified teachers, and willing learners in functional classroom facilities, but to questions on how to deal with which aspects of a diverse, multi-religious, multi-racial, multi-linguistic, multi-cultural and 'rainbow nation' that is South Africa (11 official languages as just one example of a notion of 'cultural diversity').

The 21 young learners (6 boys, 15 girls) who participated in the weeklong project, mentioned above came from a primary school in the suburb of Athlone. This Colored, working class suburb on the Cape Flats borders a light industrial area and Black townships including Gugulethu and Khayelitsha. Within the stratification of townships themselves are the further dividing lines of ‘high risk zones’ such as Delft and Philippi. Some learners came from those areas even though they are much further afield as this particular school is one that takes children from these very deprived areas. Many live away from their immediate homes in safer districts closer to facilities (such as schools), typically living with a grandmother and other temporarily employed family members and/or friends.

The notion of safety in teaching and learning environments in South Africa and elsewhere, has outlined the shifting terrain of the notion of a safe haven, which some schools may represent for some communities. When schools and other places of learning become ‘high risk zones’ and spaces of societal mayhem, what hope exists for young bodies who are desirous of investigating lofty issues of science through creative dance and arts practice? American dance scholar Sherry Shapiro (2008), first writing in the early 1990s of the problem that exists of essentializing all children and a reductive stance of their supposed neutral engagement when learning through creative dance argued that,

(...) the separations between art and life, dancer and world, and individual and society need to be overcome. Dance must be connected to the world in order to re-create and re-shape the world. (Shapiro, 1999, p. 135)

What felt like an absconding from their parental duty and a prevailing disappointment on the part of some of the project’s educators, when only a handful of the children indicated that some of their parents may possibly attend the final showing of the various experiences undertaken (described in the introductory narrative above), can be more fully understood in a wider reading of the child’s world as suggested by Shapiro. This would include unemployment and lack of means by many parents and guardians of the participants. So, how to begin to teach dance and visual arts in this place? What may account

for the ‘pedagogies of hope’ (Freire, 1996), which was an underlying endeavor of the project to find ways to create in Cape Town late February 2017? How can we as adults representing certain institutional powers just by being who we are (a diverse group of White, Colored and Indian, middle class artist-educators and researchers) produce knowledge about the life-worlds of these children? Which approaches will make them share their experiences and viewpoints? And how can they become aware of what those are?

“NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US” – CONSEQUENCES FOR RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The statement “nothing about us without us” as formulated by James I. Charlton (2000) was originally used by activists in the South African disability-rights movement, but has also inspired policy making related to other minority groups and in other places of the world. If taking this statement seriously when teaching and doing research with children it also means that their voices should always form an important part of the practice that we as adults create for them. Critical theory emphasizes thinking about how we can “see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed” (Apple, 2013, p. 39) and to consider the complex issues of the society we are dealing with. Phenomenology as a research strategy can help to highlight the first-person perspective of those whose lives we are trying to understand and the voices of the children can come to the fore by us asking them about their viewpoints and ideas all along in the processes of both teaching and doing research with them. But in this theoretical perspective it is central that ‘voice’ is not only a verbal phenomenon, just as ‘text’ in a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective (Hermansen & Dahl Rendtorff, 2002) can also be understood in the broadest possible manner, as all kinds of expression that are bearers of meaning. So when we in this article, for example, include some of the children’s drawings, they are examples of ways that we have tried to give them a ‘voice’. A hermeneutic-phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990) has, as its aim, to create deeper understandings of what meaning people make of experienced phenomena and through this approach we can make visible what themes turn out to be central in the processes we experience and observe in the created space. Van Manen

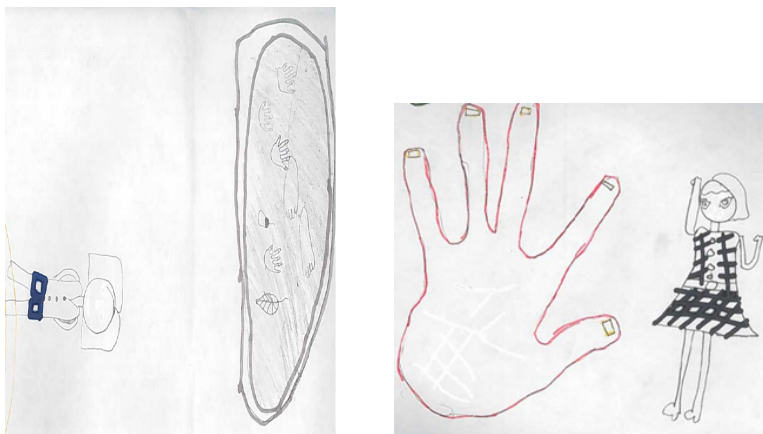
(1990, p. 7) also highlights that descriptions of “significant moments” are central when we want to understand human experience and lived meanings. Those moments can come forth in “concrete stories that present moments of teaching” and “may provide opportunities for reflecting pedagogically on actions, situations, and relations of teaching” (van Manen, 1990, p. 54). Such moments can be observed and articulated through a variety of methods as will be described further below.

ARTS-BASED METHODS BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN EXPRESSIONS AND EXPERIENCES

The project we undertook was a teaching and research project at the same time. We experimented with ways of integrating dance and visual arts in both educational exercises and to elicit knowledge about the children’s experiences of doing the exercises. We tried different verbal and non-verbal/arts-based exercises to create a visible relation between their embodied experiences and ways of expressing themselves about those experiences (see also Svendler Nielsen, 2009). This way of doing research is grounded in theories of multi-modality, for example Marcel Danesi (2007) who describes how sensations in one mode can be evoked by sensations in a different mode as is the case in this exercise:

At the end of the day’s sessions the children were given a piece of paper and asked to fold it. They were asked to take a moment to think about what we had done during the morning and to choose one exercise that they particularly liked. On one part of the paper they were asked to draw themselves doing the exercise, on the other page they were asked to draw their sensation of doing the exercise. On most of the drawings we see the sandpit and imprints of feet, hands and other body parts. And many visualize the sensations of this exercise as drawings of over-sized body parts with sand on them.

(Charlotte Svendler Nielsen)



Pictures 1 and 2: Imprints of body parts in the sandpit and imprint of sand on hand

The drawing of an experience becomes an exercise to understand the children's meaning-making (Wright, 2010) and at the same time adds another layer to the learning process as the children also become aware that they had this experience. Another example of integration of the artistic-educational practice and the research process is described in the following:

When arriving to PCAC on day three I see that the South African visual arts educator, Liesl, who is going to lead the beginning of the session has placed a big piece of blank paper spread over the whole floor. The piece of paper makes me think of a short text I read one day in the newspaper by a Danish author considering the different experiences feet have with surface depending on where they live, as to me this piece of paper looks like a big piece of ice. At our morning coffee moment before the children arrive I tell Liesl about this text. Quickly she takes up that idea and develops it into a concrete exercise related to the EARTH theme of the day. She has the children walk on the 'ice' and draw their imagined sensations with different colored crayons. The exercise becomes a way to learn about seasons and the elements of nature at the same time as it also becomes an interesting visualization of the children's experiences in an embodied research perspective.

(Charlotte Svendler Nielsen)

DIALOGUING AND OBSERVING

Being many artist-educators and researchers permitted us to sometimes take the role of participant observers in the exercises with the children. This direct involvement gave more natural opportunities to talk to the children while they were solving the tasks given, rather than asking questions in a more formal interview setting.

One of many highlights came in and outside the art room, situated on ground level. On day two, the session on AIR in which the children were learning to make a windsock from lightweight craft paper, the children reflected on the previous day's theme of WATER. Given the extreme conditions of drought in the Cape, the topic was readily accessible to all. The conversation turned to how one should wash the dishes with many agreeing that a basin in the sink was important to save as much water as possible. Interestingly, it also gave rise to 'why boys don't wash up...' and a chance for me as teacher to fuel a debate. During this dispute a cloud of girls' voices softly began singing in isiXhosa. The moment soon vaporized but this additional, liminal lesson of the politics of gender is, in my view, one of the greatest assets of fluid pedagogy. (Gerard M. Samuel)

By engaging with the children in exercises or by asking questions in situations that arise, sometimes with one child, other times with a small group, it seems easier for them to talk. We also learned that we needed to ask questions that are more 'indirect' in nature, e.g. "what did you say at home about what we did yesterday?" "What would you say to your other classmates about the week at PCAC when you come back to the school next week?" For example, while they had lunch one day Charlotte talked to a couple of girls about the drawings they had made the day before and the difference between this project and going to school normally. In the conversation they responded that the difference is that "here we don't write as much as in school." She also asked what is new to them in this project and it seemed that it is all new: "To be with a friendly teacher", "to paint with brushes," "to be asked what we like" were some of their responses. Altogether, the methods employed allow both reflective and pre-reflective layers of

consciousness in the form of thoughts, experiences, feelings and senses to be shared and to be presented in arts-based productions (Jones & Leavy, 2014) of different formats.

THE ARTS-EDUCATIONAL SPACE CREATED IN THE RED APPLES – GREEN APPLES PROJECT

What defines the educational space we created in the project? And how does it contribute to a ‘pedagogy of hope’ in a Freireian sense? The South African children have come with great stamina and resilience in spite of home environments that are impoverished. Rather than glasses that are seen as half empty, they must be recognized as being half full and very capable of growing their artistic and creative flair, as well as developing strong empathy for a struggling planet and its people (Freire, 1970). Bearing this philosophy in mind, so many narratives from the project week stand out for us like gems and we will now look in depth at some of these ‘significant moments’ (van Manen, 1990). When taking a phenomenological perspective in exploring experiences the ‘lived space’ is closely related to other existential themes defined by van Manen (1990) as ‘lived body’, ‘lived time’ and ‘lived human relation’. These overall themes will henceforth offer a frame for the analysis, but in order to get deeper into an understanding of these themes we are including authors from visual arts (Wright, 2010) and dance (Danuser & Sabetti, 2001) that, like us, are focusing on an embodied perspective.

We can say that we have learned when we have understood a new idea, developed a new skill, or become more aware of something than we were before (Danuser & Sabetti, 2001). Danuser and Sabetti (2001, p. 76) also underline that “the way we learn is strongly influenced by our individual expression of joy in the learning process.” So when we are looking for ‘significant moments’ in an educational practice as recommended by van Manen (1990), we are characterizing such moments as those in which the children either from our perspective seem to be deeply engaged and enjoying the activities, or through artistic means or dialogue they indicate that this is the case.

Lived space

Sadly, being outside the confines of a classroom, with its frequently obsessively neat architecture of desks and chairs in rows like obedient soldiers, is becoming a less common teaching and learning practice in many urban schools on the Cape Flats today. The real presence and fear of crime and gang violence in many spaces has resulted in teachers resorting to conducting their work in the relative safety of closed rooms. The Red Apples – Green Apples project was designed from the outset to be in multiple spaces including the outdoors. The upstairs balcony, which was an unwritten off limits space to the children, became the site for an infectious welcome via fluttering papers and confetti, which the children threw with gusto to the visitors, all of which re-enforced their understanding of the power of AIR, but also of more complex constructs such as breath and flight.

(Gerard M. Samuel)

The approach to arts education that we practice in this project is one in which the children's imagination and creative processes are at the fore (Samuel, 2015). When we work on imagining new or different possibilities of, for example, ways of using the sites of the building, this might indirectly also help to imagine different possibilities in the bigger picture of their lives (like the situation in which Gerard is discussing different possibilities for saving water with the children described in the methodology paragraph). So in very concrete ways, "art making also allows children to explore abstract and complex concepts, such as what the future may be like" as highlighted by Susan Wright (2010, p. 10).

Lived body

According to Wright (2010, p. 81), "the somatic meaning-making is *performed* as children play and draw." This is perhaps even more clear when they also dance as part of the learning processes. Through playing with different means (paper, color, movements) they explore ideas, which allow them to understand the world in more embodied ways as is happening in this exercise in the sandpit in the front garden (see also pictures 1 and 2):

The male artist-educator, Peter, from Denmark leads a group of 10 learners towards the sandpit. When they arrive they make a circle around the sandpit. Peter puts one of his feet hard down in the sand and takes it up again leaving an imprint of his foot. He asks the children to do the same. Then he puts his hand in the sand, takes it up again and asks them to do the same. When they lift their hands he asks them to look at their own hands and tell him what is different about them now. One boy says “there is sand on it!” “Yes,” Peter says, “you are making imprints in the sandpit, but the sandpit also leaves imprints on you.” They try with more body parts and then have a discussion about how they make imprints on the world, but the world also makes imprints on them, and how the imprints they make on the world are perhaps influencing the immediate climate change of the lack of water they are experiencing so desperately at this time... the next morning the day starts in the ‘home room’ with Peter asking the children to remember the movements they made in the sandpit and to show to each other how they made imprints in the sand and finally recapping what the act of making imprints could mean from a broader environmental or social perspective.

(Charlotte Svendler Nielsen)

We worked with a focus on expression and experience either going from experience to expression (like in the sandpit exercise) or from expression to experience. In both kinds of processes reflection became central, but not just the mental reflection, also the reflection that happened at an embodied level, before the conscious thought processes. According to Wright (2010), drawing is a form of thinking and being aware that is deeply rooted in the body. Similarly, we maintain dancing is both an expression and experience from the body — a ‘thinking-feeling’ response from the children. The ‘lived body’ is thus central in many artistic processes and in our ambitions to foster deep learning about climatic and cultural issues. When working with the arts in a creative manner it is unavoidable that “a variety of modalities, such as speech, image, sound, movement and gesture” contribute to creating “multimodal forms of meaning” (Wright, 2010, p. 2). The more senses that are involved in a learning process

at the same time, the more engaging the experience will be and as a consequence the comprehension and experience of meaning will also be deeper and longer lasting (Danuser & Sabetti, 2001), which, for example, became evident in the sandpit exercise and the reflections about it done in different modalities.

Lived time

The *experience* of time can be different to the *measured* time when, for example, we feel that 'time is running' because we are deeply engaged in an exercise (van Manen, 1990). Time also connects experiences from past and present to future (ideas and hopes). Being conscious of experiences of time, and *timing* is linked to creating engaged energy among the learners when teaching. A teacher who is sensitive to observing points of boredom or interest is able to stimulate the students with the right exercises to keep them engaged (Danuser & Sabetti, 2001). The change of stimulus can, as in the descriptions below for example, be about changing the place of teaching to go outdoors, to change the exercise to work in a different sensuous mode (from the visual to the bodily), or to use silence instead of talk (show instead of explaining).

When the groups work on crafting a collage I focus my attention on observing Gerard's group. At one point he makes the children get up, without saying anything he makes them hold each other's hands, walk around in a circle and sit in a new place to watch their creation (it all happens in total silence). When I later asked him why he decided to do this, he said that he is aware of how the perspective/the way we are positioned in relation to what may be perceived as central or the norm, needs to be challenged. By standing in the 'shoes' or space of (an)other he can begin to become sensitized to other points of view that may be different from his own. And he wanted the children to experience this lens and way of knowing too, but did not feel it was necessary to tell them what they had to experience. The sudden silence also seems to work as a pedagogical tool to engage the children. I later asked him if he did this consciously. He responded that he had found that in the business of classroom activities it is important to slow down, take a breath and a moment to find

out 'how am I feeling in this moment'. For him, it is a question of how to develop a feeling for children both of being secure individually and communally.

(Charlotte Svendler Nielsen)

Lived human relation

When we meet other people we first and foremost meet them as physical beings, but the physical dimension is in a phenomenological perspective interconnected with the psychological dimension of living (van Manen, 1990). To create an experience in a space with others always happens as inter-personal processes. In this project at the outset artist-educators and researchers with very different educational strategies and philosophies met. The differences had to do with both cultural backgrounds and with usual practice in the two art forms, but perhaps mostly to educational philosophies at stake in our different geographical cultures. During the week a new, arts-based educational culture seemed to be collaboratively emerging in the space that the group created. It was not negotiated at a very conscious level that this is what was happening. But we had a shared purpose of finding ways to integrate the two art forms, so many discussions evolved around how the exercises we did worked from this perspective and what we could do to integrate even more. Slowly we all started changing our ways of thinking to include the visual and the bodily dimensions in all exercises. At the same time it was also evident that being sensuously aware of how we could intervene and complement each other while teaching and/or doing research, and all of us allowing that focus on process, seemed to open an artistic-*educational* space. This gave rise to many experiences of 'significant moments' from the perspectives of all involved.



Picture 3: Children and adults coming closer

This change of relationships not only happened between the adults, but also in the learner-educator relationships. From being very quiet and quick at standing in straight lines when they were asked to, the children started loosening up. They started to ask more questions, to jump around and play in the breaks as the days went by and they probably started sensing that doing this was okay in the space we had created.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGICAL REFLECTION

This artistic-educational space is far removed from the resources of the overwhelming majority of primary schools in the Cape Flats or similar working class environments. This may explain why I witnessed aggressive grabbing from the confetti box in their over excitement to shower surrogate parents and friends with their blessings when illustrating the element of AIR by throwing these from the balcony. In spite of my repeated assurances that there was enough for all, a survival mode for me, appeared to kick in. This was a reality check for me that despite the wonderful shifts I had noticed in their bodies as they became more comfortable to hug and greet me hello and goodbye by the 3rd, 4th and 5th day, the children and not I were returning to the space of the Cape Flats and the place they call home. (Gerard M. Samuel)

Educational sociologist Michael W. Apple (2013) most intriguingly asks if education can change society. By asking that question in the

first place there seems to be a presumption that societies should be changed, but should all societies necessarily be changed? Which societies should be changed? Why? How? And, as Apple (2013, p. 45) asks: “whose voices are heard?” when we as educators enter such discussions.

Working with children in the Cape Flats we get insights into lives that certainly could be better in many ways compared to other children’s lives that we know of in other educational settings. But it seems like a difficult project to change much in a society that deals with so many huge challenges as is the case here. So what can arts education do to help in this respect? With the place, the time, the artist-educators and the materials we had at our disposal, it was possible to create a space that fostered elements of learning about the subject specific contents (e.g. climate change), give the learners new experiences of engaging in creative activities, to focus more on their own felt experiences and also reflect upon them. This will perhaps not help them to change their society, but at least it could help them to experience their lives differently. But we are very aware that the day-to-day possibilities in the schools of the Western Cape are of a different reality. What happens when they come back to their normal school and the teachers who do not have a curriculum that guides such teaching? We could ask if it was relevant to the children that we did this week of teaching, which was so different to what they normally experience, or did it just make them come back with less motivation to engage in their regular school activities? Is it useful in their lives to have been part of a different way of “going to school”? (as some of the children put it). We found it extremely difficult to ask the children such highly philosophical questions, perhaps because there are some power issues at stake as we are different ages, different genders and different races, but we also felt that it might be new to these children to even think about these questions as in their everyday school lives they are not so used to being asked about their experiences and opinions. Another consideration on our part was what kinds of ethical issues would we step into by asking such questions? Would it be of benefit to the children to start thinking about this? Therefore to complement the talks we had with them, which only indirectly can help to answer these

questions, we needed to include the voice of their class teacher as their ‘ambassador’. We got the possibility to come back to the school some months after the initial project week to involve the learners in interpretation of the material we had created and to ask some of these questions to the class teacher. Here is how she responded to our questions:

“After the learners’ time during February, the learners seemed to be more motivated and enthused toward each day. They were given the chance to explore their surroundings in a way they never thought was possible and they explored themselves through the arts. This opened up a new way for them to see learning. For days after our time at the Art Centre the learners were repeating, singing or re-enacting something they learnt. The content they engaged with during the project was relevant to the curriculum (e.g. Water cycle) and so they showed a deeper understanding during class time. Each concept they learnt improved not only their content knowledge but their worldly knowledge too (...) Many learners who attended during February don’t have the best circumstances. Yet, each day they find solace within our schools walls. They needed a “different” outlet to express themselves. The project celebrated their differences. This proved to be the highlight of my time spent with the learners. Getting to experience a child who “struggles” in class relish in the moments they were given, while learning.”

Danuser and Sabetti (2001, p. 75) make the argument that, “the way we learn influences the way we live.” This supports that teaching children to learn in many ways might also give them a broader spectrum for ways of living their lives, like the teacher is emphasizing in these quotes. So despite the many personal, cultural and political issues that we were dealing with between the lines while co-constructing this new and intercultural space for teaching and learning, it seems that we, to some extent, succeeded in giving this group of learners a useful experience of what arts education can be, what it can be used for and as professionals we certainly all also got new perspectives and issues to consider for our future practices and lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank all the children who embarked on this project with us. We also wish to thank the Peter Clarke Art Centre in Cape Town and its staff for contributing to the project. Without the acceptance of the selected primary school, the parents and the children's class teacher it would not have been possible to start this project. We owe all of them many thanks as well.

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